

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON

# Color, Line, and Shape

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



## Le Gourmet

1901

by Pablo Picasso

(pronounced: Pea-kahs-so)

(Spanish, 1881–1973)

■ Picasso was just twenty years old when he painted this picture. He had recently persuaded his parents to let him leave Barcelona and move to Paris, where he eventually became part of a large bohemian artistic community. Many of Picasso's paintings of this period emphasize the color blue. Though they may have been exercises in studying the many shades and tints of a single hue, the pictures also reflect a sense of Picasso's personal loneliness, poverty, and identification with society's underclass.

The young girl in this work is tipping up her bowl to scrape out a last morsel of food. The painting's name, *Le Gourmet* (translated from French as a lover of fine food), is really an ironic comment on the child's status in life. She is shown with just the barest of necessities—a nearly empty bowl, a mug, and a scrap of bread on the table. Picasso bathed the little girl and her surroundings in the color blue, and used bold lines that curve around her figure, the tablecloth, the floor, and the drapery. The table is tilted down and the floor is tilted up, flattening the scene into lozenges of patterns and textures.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Though most of this painting is blue, you can see little touches of the other two primary colors the artist used. Where do you find red and yellow?
- 2 Dark lines in *Le Gourmet* outline different shapes. Look carefully and discover shapes that are the same, even though their colors may be different.
- 3 In many places you can observe the way Picasso applied his paint. Choose several areas; discuss the type of brushstrokes he used and the directions in which they move.

## Interior

1944

by Horace Pippin

(American, 1888–1946)

(detail, cover)

■ Unlike Picasso, Horace Pippin's career as an artist began at mid-life, when he was about forty. He had no formal artistic training but worked as a potter, furniture packer, ironworker, and soldier. Pippin often chose to paint personal experiences, including scenes from his youth. Here we see a family, perhaps his own, in a large, rather bare room. Though there are a few signs of poverty, such as cracks in the wall and a broken chair slat, little patches of color make the room seem lively and cozy. The woman puffs away on her pipe, the baby plays with a doll, and the youth works busily at the table.

Notice how each object in the room is carefully described. We see a candle instead of electric lamps, a bowl and dipper for washing, clothing hooks on the wall, a wind-up clock on the shelf telling us the time of day—even snow on the windowpanes, indicating winter. Though the painting is full of rectangles, curved shapes add variety and the overall impression is one of structural order. Pippin made the scene so detailed that we imagine he must have had a very clear memory of his childhood environment.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Bright red makes people stop and take notice. Which touches of red in this painting draw your eyes from one part of the room to another?
- 2 Lines help determine a picture's mood (such as calm, exciting, angry, or happy). Find several horizontal lines that make this painting feel calm, ordered, and still.
- 3 *Interior* has many repeated shapes. Where do you see squares? Skinny rectangles? Triangles? Circles?

## Beasts of the Sea

1950

by Henri Matisse

(pronounced: Ahn-ree Mah-teas)

(French, 1869–1954)

■ Henri Matisse was a French artist widely known for his vividly colored, expressive paintings. When Matisse was an old man, no longer able to stand at an easel to work, he developed a new way to make pictures. After his assistants had painted sheets of paper in bright tempera colors, the artist cut out interesting shapes with his scissors. From his bed he then directed their arrangement on the canvas. Once the assistants had pinned the shapes on the surface to Matisse’s satisfaction, the pieces were glued in place.

In this cutout, called *Beasts of the Sea*, Matisse remembers the South Pacific islands he had visited twenty years earlier. He took familiar marine organisms and abstracted them into biomorphic shapes. With curved figures and waving lines, he shows us the rhythm of life beneath the sea. We can imagine light passing through different layers of water to pick out the creatures, plants, and shells on the ocean floor.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Choose three different background patches of color and explain what each could represent.
- 2 Pippin’s *Interior* is a horizontal painting, but Matisse’s cutout has a vertical format. Why is this composition useful for a picture of the ocean?
- 3 Look at their shapes and decide what kind of sea creatures you think Matisse’s “beasts” might be.

## Orange and Tan

1954

by Mark Rothko

(American, 1903–1970)

■ Mark Rothko was an important abstract expressionist painter. His luminous, color-saturated paintings convey a powerful serenity. In *Orange and Tan*, an orange rectangle hovers above a yellow rectangle, tinged with green. These blocks of color float over a tan background. Rothko achieved the shimmering, light-filled quality of his paintings by using extremely thin oil paint. He successively layered these thin washes, allowing light to pass through each one of them as they gradually soaked into the canvas. The warm tones of *Orange and Tan* are particularly radiant.

While Rothko did not intend his mature canvases to represent something specific, he did compare their appearance to the fronts of buildings. Others have responded to this effect by seeing his rectangles as doors into a spirit world because of the luminous color and texture of the painting. Rothko was concerned with the viewer’s physical relationship to his canvases and the impression that one could be absorbed by the painting is consistent with his aims. *Orange and Tan* is almost seven feet tall and five feet wide. He did not like his large works displayed in large spaces, but felt that “they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture.”

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Some people see Rothko’s big rectangles as doorways. If you could walk into this painting, what would it feel like?
- 2 Think about Rothko’s use of rectangular shapes only on a field of color. Would his paintings have the same impact if he had used only circles or triangles? Why or why not?
- 3 Imagine that you were asked to make a painting inspired by Rothko’s *Orange and Tan*. What would it look like?

# Information

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*Please check your school tour confirmation letter for the location where your tour will begin. If you are unable to keep this appointment, notify the Tour Scheduler at 202.842.6249 as soon as possible.*

## LUNCH FACILITIES

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